



# Whooping crane

## *Grus americana*

### STATUS

Endangered (58 FR 5657, January 22, 1993)

Experimental, nonessential (62 FR 38939, July 21, 1997)

### DESCRIPTION

The graceful whooping crane, America's tallest bird, has a long neck and legs, a snow-white body, black wing tips and a red and black head. A "Whooper's" wingspan may reach as wide as 7 1/2 feet. Whooping cranes nest in freshwater marshes, wet prairies and along lake margins. During migration periods and in the winter, birds (usually in small family groups) may be found in grain and stubble fields, salt flats, marches or on shallow lakes. The birds feed on insects, crustaceans and berries in the summer. Their winter diet includes grains, acorns, mollusks, amphibians, reptiles, blue crabs and some fish. The early spring courtship "dance" of these birds is spectacular, with loud vocalizations, flapping wings, strutting and giant leaps into the air. Whooping crane pairs mate for life, and construct nests of mounded marsh vegetation that often rise above water level. The pair takes turns incubating one to three eggs for about 33 days.

### HISTORY

At one time, whooping cranes were found over much of central and eastern North America. There are some historical accounts of whooping cranes in Idaho. At one time, the birds wintered in an area that extended from the Carolinas to Mexico.

### DISTRIBUTION

Today, the current number of whooping cranes is only about 150. One self-sustaining population continues to migrate from Canada to the Gulf Coast of Texas, and one experimental non-migratory population has been established in central Florida. An Idaho population was reestablished through introduction in Gray's Lake National Wildlife Refuge. There are a few individuals in southeastern Idaho Wyoming and Montana that migrate to New Mexico.

### WHAT HAS THREATENED THIS SPECIES?

Although whooping cranes were never common birds in North America, they were hunted to the point of extinction for their plumage in the early 1900s. Juvenile whooper mortality is high, mostly due to shootings, lead poisoning, collisions with power lines, bad weather and disease. Adults also are prone to the same hazards. Today, loss of wetland habitat poses the greatest threat to the whooping crane and its recovery.

### WHAT IS BEING DONE TO HELP RECOVER THIS SPECIES?

Whooping cranes have benefited from wetland and waterway restoration, captive breeding efforts and reintroduction. Protection of migratory species such as whooping cranes is challenging because it requires quality habitat maintenance along the entire migration route which stretches from Texas to Canada. Tasks for recovery include the establishment of additional migratory populations, protection of wetland complexes for breeding and wintering, public hunter education programs and continued research. The cross-fostering experiment at Gray's Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Idaho has been discontinued. Sandhill cranes successfully raised whoopers and taught them the migration route, but the whoopers were imprinted wrong and never mated. Only a few whoopers remain in this experimental population.

### REFERENCES

USFWS. 1986. Whooping crane recovery plan.

